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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: PROTESTANT EFFORTS TO REGISTER;
UNEVEN PROGRESS IN NORTHERN VIETNAM

REF: A) HANOI 549; B) HANOI 392; C) HANOI 395; D) 05 HANOI

1051

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Summary and Comment

11. (SBU) House church leaders affiliated with the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (ECVN) recently updated Poloff on their efforts to officially register the activities of their congregations in Vietnam's northern provinces. Progress in registration and other improvements in conditions for Protestants have been slow, with most problems stemming from recalcitrant local officials rather than from official policies. Each case outlined by the deacons seems to reflect delaying tactics adopted by district and commune officials in the face of unpopular provincial and central Government policies. Many of these deacons identified local problematic individuals rather than local government as the source of their problems. Systemic prejudice reported in Lao Cai and Ha Giang provinces is worrying, but across the region the growing official neglect is a modest but noteworthy improvement over past official hostility to Protestants. We will follow up previous travel to the region with further fact-finding visits in late April and early June to directly investigate conditions and to press local officials at the district level to change their approach to Protestants. End Summary and Comment.

12. (SBU) On April 5, ECVN General Secretary Au Quanh Vinh arranged for eight H'mong house church deacons to travel to Hanoi to meet with Embassy Poloff in keeping with our request for regular updates on the situation for Protestants in the provinces in northern Vietnam with large ethnic minority populations (reftels). These include the Northwest Highlands provinces of Cao Bang, Dien Bien, Ha Giang, Lai Chau, Loa Cai, Son La, Thai Nguyen, Tuyen Quang and Yen Bai, in addition to Bac Kan, Lang Son, Quang Ninh and Thanh Hoa. Vinh stated that since the GVN promulgated its new framework for religion last year, there have been improvements in religious freedom in some northern provinces, but most Protestants in the region still do not trust local officials and are afraid to seek registration. In some provinces, conditions are downright bad, with Ha Giang and Lao Cai provinces the worst. Ha Giang officials will not even accept letters requesting registration application materials from local congregations or from the ECVN itself. Vinh showed Poloff two letters sent to the People's Committee (PC) in Quan Binh District of Ha Giang (one sent by a congregation and the other directly by the ECVN). Both letters were returned unopened in official PC envelopes.

13. (SBU) Vinh noted that, according to ECVN's latest records, there are 120,536 Protestants in the thirteen provinces listed above. Out of a total of 1,027 H'mong Protestant house churches, over 600 have applied to register their activities. To date, not a single group has been allowed to formally register. Although the ECVN had initially planned to instruct only one-third of the groups to apply in order to gauge official receptivity to applications, the ECVN has now decided to encourage all remaining groups to submit their applications out of concern that groups that wait will have greater difficulties later. Though each house church leader is free to decide whether to apply or not, the ECVN strongly desires they do so. The ECVN is also encouraging groups to conduct religious services "in a normal manner" (i.e., assembling regularly for worship at local residences) as often as possible. All churches are prepared for a possible strong reaction from local officials across the north resulting from the ECVN's new policies, he added.

Thai Nguyen Province

14. (SBU) Thai Nguyen has a total of sixteen house churches comprising 319 families, or 2,189 total members. House church Deacon Ly Van Vanh from Vo Nhai District stated that his congregation has not had difficulties with officials at the commune level, the lowest administrative unit. Authorities do not acknowledge letters or other communications from the congregation, but they also do not interfere with their activities so long as the group keeps its services low key. The Protestants' main problems come from district-level officials, the next administrative level up. In particular, a few ethnic H'mong police officers have made vague threats against house church leaders for "corrupting the traditions of the H'mong people." These problems do not seem to originate with PC officials, but

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rather seem to derive from the initiative of individuals. Ethnic minority church members who speak Vietnamese have been able to enlist local PC protection and have resolved their problems with these policemen, but a majority of church followers in the area only speak H'mong. Intra-H'mong problems persist for these believers, Vanh said. Thai Nguyen is among the group of provinces the Ambassador will visit during his next two trips north, tentatively scheduled for late June and early July.

Tuyen Quang Province

15. (SBU) Tuyen Quang has a total of fifty-one house churches comprising 596 families, or 2,477 total members. House church Deacon Thao Seo Din from Yan Son District of Tuyen Quang stated that his congregation has long since finished filling in all the necessary forms for their registration application, but local officials claim that they are not authorized to approve the application and will not accept it. The officials are "waiting to hear from provincial authorities." Protestants are allowed to assemble for worship without difficulties in this district, but some local authorities have told house church leaders that Protestants still aren't trusted because they "are followers of an American religion," he said. The Ambassador also intends to visit Tuyen Quang during his July trip.

Ha Giang Province

16. (SBU) Ha Giang has a total of 126 house churches comprising 2,178 families, or 13,010 total members. Deacon Din noted that his district in Tuyen Quang borders Vi Xuyen District in Ha Giang, which is a far more problematic province for Protestants. Din has been assisting the Vi

Xuyen congregation in their efforts to register. Local authorities fined the Vi Xuyen house church pastor VND 500,000 (USD 32), or more than half of his monthly salary, for traveling to Hanoi to pick up registration forms from the ECVN. (Note: On average, it costs a church leader from this district VND 400,000 (USD 25) to travel to Hanoi. Members of the church usually contribute to pay for these costs. End Note.) In addition, lay deacons of the church were fined VND 100,000 VND (USD 6) each for "being Protestant" and for signing documents requesting registration for their group. Despite these fines, local officials do not even open application letters from the Vi Xuyen church, Din said.

17. (SBU) House church Deacon Lo Seo Su from Xin Man District in Ha Giang stated that district-level authorities have told his unregistered congregation that, "if five or more of your members gather together, we will prosecute you." The group has submitted an application to register, but has not yet received any official response to their request. At this point, most members of the congregation are afraid to assemble for worship, although local authorities allow members to practice their religion at home. Su noted that neighboring district villages are allowed to assemble without any problems. The Ambassador has twice written to Ha Giang provincial authorities to seek clarification on reports of abuse of Protestant believers; we have yet to receive a response.

Lang Son Province

18. (SBU) Lang Son has only two house churches comprising forty-four families, or 292 total members. House church Deacon Ly Van Sung of Bac Son District noted that the problems Protestants face in his area seem to be based on ethnic differences. An ethnic Dzao Protestant church has been registered and operating for "a long time," while a neighboring H'mong church has not been registered despite repeated applications to do so. Three days after the first of these applications, local officials told church leaders that, "if you operate as described, you will be punished." However, followers in the district are still able to assemble for worship. Authorities insist that church leaders must seek permission to travel (which is never given) any time they wish to visit Hanoi to receive registration assistance from ECVN headquarters, though deacons and pastors routinely ignore this requirement. Another serious problem Protestants face in this area is that only Vietnamese language bibles are legal, but very few followers speak Vietnamese, he said. The Committee on Religious Affairs confirms that only Vietnamese or English

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language translations of the bible are currently legal across Vietnam.

Yen Bai Province

19. (SBU) Yen Bai has a total of five house churches comprising seventy-five families, or 429 total members. House church Deacon Giang A Lau of Van Yan District stated that there are only three Protestant congregations in all of Yen Bai. Two of these groups have applied to register, but local authorities have not approved either application. None of the groups have encountered problems since the applications were submitted, although a district-level policeman told some church members that, "it is okay if you follow religion now, but if international attention is drawn to your groups, we will arrest your leaders." Local authorities at the district level also said that if Protestants fail to obey instructions and continue to follow "illegal religions and elements that want to take advantage of religion to do bad things," they will make trouble for house churches. Lau noted that officials seem mainly

concerned that outside groups will take advantage of ignorant H'mong believers in the province. Poloff visited in February and met with provincial officials to discuss religious freedom issues (Ref A). The Ambassador also intends to visit Yen Bai during his June trip.

Lao Cai Province

¶10. (SBU) Lao Cai has a total of 122 house churches comprising 2,108 families, or 10,808 total members. House church Deacon Chu Seo Cu from Huyen Bao District stated that officials in five out of Lao Cai Province's ten districts are hostile to Protestants. In late 2005, the pastor of Huyen Bao congregation acquired application forms from the ECVN and submitted them to district authorities. He was told "it is okay for you to apply, but you need approval from the grassroots level" before the district PC gave permission. No further explanation of what constitutes "grassroots level" approval was offered by the officials. Since this exchange, Protestants in this district have been prevented from assembling for worship and told by police that, "if you get together in someone's house, we will punish the owner of that house," he said.

¶11. (SBU) Cu noted that Protestants in Bao Thuc District have not been allowed to celebrate Christmas since 1990. In 2005, they were required to seek permission from local authorities for their Christmas celebrations, but just before the holiday, local authorities ordered the congregation to take down all decorations. Around the same time, two deacons in Bat Sat District who traveled to Hanoi were fined VND 500,000. In addition, two deacons from Phung Hai District who recently acquired application forms from the ECVN were arrested on their return from Hanoi and held for 16 days. These individuals were fined VND 2.5 million (USD 160 USD) and VND five million (USD 320) respectively for possession of illegal H'mong language bibles, he said.

¶12. (SBU) According to Cu, officials in Bac Ha District refuse to even forward the local congregation's registration application to higher officials. The officials have also encouraged non-Protestant relatives to harass believers until they give up their religion. In one case, police refused to intervene when the brother of a Protestant woman repeatedly beat her husband, hinting that, "since you are Protestant, it is okay for him to beat your husband until he and you renounce your faith." This couple has now moved to another district. In Baa Yen District, officials even went as far as "threatening to use guns" if Protestants persist in following their "illegal American religion," he said. The Ambassador has twice written to Lao Cai authorities to seek clarification of allegations of religious freedom violations and received responses denying all charges. The Ambassador traveled to Lao Cai in April 2005 and met with provincial leaders to discuss religious freedom issues (Ref D). Poloff also traveled to Lao Cai in February 2006 to raise religious freedom issues (Ref A).

Cao Bang Province

1Q(SBU) Cao Bang has a total of 144 house churches comprising 2,015 families or 9,846 total members. House church Deacon Lyu A Tuu of Bao Luc District in Cao Bang stated that the two Protestant congregations there face two

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problems. The first is an official list of five "can'ts" recently promulgated by some local authorities to guide officials on how to handle Protestants. According to these guidelines, Protestants 1) cannot assemble, 2) cannot let outside people visit their homes, 3) cannot conduct missionary activities, 4) cannot contribute money to their church and 5) cannot read bibles to themselves or to others. Local authorities have also officially notified Protestants

at the commune and district level that they are only allowed to acknowledge receipt of applications. Provincial officials are the only people who can actually approve applications. The congregations in the province are still waiting for provincial approval, he said.

Dien Bien Province

¶14. (SBU) Dien Bien has the largest Protestant population in the Northwest Highlands with a total of 430 house churches comprising 11,133 families or 71,103 total members. Deacon Lyu A Pao of Muon Nghe District in Dien Bien stated that he was arrested in 2005 after he returned to the district from Hanoi carrying ECVN documents. Officials of the Border Protection Force (BPF) justified his arrest by saying that "he was not allowed to travel that far to get documents from the ECVN" even if he asked permission first. Since this event, a special task force of BPF personnel has been living in Protestant villages to watch villager activities and to confiscate all H'mong language bibles they find. Despite these problems, Pao noted that the situation in Dien Bien has improved compared with the era of frequent beatings of Protestants in the 1990s. Nonetheless, many house church congregations are still not allowed to assemble for worship. Also, house church pastors and deacons are required to perform manual labor for BPF units in order to make them less willing to serve the church, he said. The Ambassador traveled to Dien Bien in April 2005 and met with provincial leaders to discuss religious freedom issues (Ref D). He has also written twice to provincial leadership on allegations of abuse of Protestant adherents. There has been no response to date.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) While progress in registration and other improvements in conditions for Protestants has been slow in Vietnam's northern provinces, it is evident that the majority of their problems stem from recalcitrant local officials rather than from official policies. Each case outlined by the ECVN deacons seems to result from delaying tactics adopted by district and commune officials in the face of unpopular provincial and central government policies. It is also significant that many of these deacons identified local problematic individuals rather than local government as the source of their problems. The systemic prejudice highlighted in Lao Cai and Ha Giang is worrying, but across the region the growing official neglect is a modest but noteworthy improvement over past official hostility to Protestants.

¶16. (SBU) To follow up previous travel to the region, Poloff and Pol Assistant will visit Lao Cai and Ha Giang April 23-24 to investigate these reports and to press district level official to change their approach to Protestants. In addition to meetings with provincial officials, Poloff will visit Bat Xat, Bao Thang, Bao Yen, and Xin Man districts in Lao Cai, and Vi Xuyen and Bac Quang districts in Ha Giang. Lao Cai and Ha Giang provincial officials have already agreed to facilitate visits with individual house church leaders in each district, and the Committee on Religious Affairs has pressed both provinces to be as open as possible with the team. A second trip is planned to Lai Chau and Dien Bien provinces later this spring. End Comment.

MARINE